

## Paperwork filed for class-action suit against Wilson

By Mike Ellis

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EASLEY — Paperwork to begin a class-action lawsuit has been filed against Ron Wilson, his business and an Easley financial planning company and its operators.

The complaint came on the same day that state investigators fielded questions from about 200 investors during a meeting in a Tri-County Technical College classroom in Easley.

The filing in a Pickens County court on Monday by Covington Patrick, a Greenville law firm, names Professional Planning Inc. of Easley as a key accomplice to Wilson's business.

The civil action comes in addition to a civil complaint from the state attorney general's office which alleges fraud by Wilson and his Atlantic Bullion & Coin, which took about \$71 million in investments from hundreds of investors in 25 states since 2009. Wilson has not been arrested or charged.

Attorneys from the Covington Patrick firm, along with Easley attorney and investor Candy Kern-Fuller, hosted a meeting March 19 with investors to begin the class-action suit. The filing identifies William Strewing as the plaintiff acting on behalf of others and names Wilson, his business, Professional Planning Inc., Tracy Atwell and Ed Atwell. Tracy Atwell is identified as the principal of Professional Planning and Ed Atwell is named as either a current or former principal.

Tracy Atwell and her financial company have not responded to requests for comment. The Atwells and Professional Planning Inc. have not been charged or named in any filings that have been made public by state or federal officials.

At the investors' meeting Monday night, South Carolina Senior Assistant Attorney General Tracy Meyers was asked whether Professional Planning Inc. had any involvement in an alleged Ponzi scheme. The lawyer carefully danced around the question.

"They haven't been named in any complaint by our office but if you talk to enough people in this room you'll know the answer," she said.

Professional Planning Inc., a financial planning company, has had a small sign outside its Easley offices, saying it is closed, for two weeks, about the time Wilson was publicly identified in a complaint by the state attorney general's office.

Monday's meeting was set up by state Rep. Joshua Putnam of Powdersville and state Sen. Kevin Bryant of Anderson, Republicans who have each received \$1,000 from Wilson but have vowed to return those donations when a victims' fund is established. Putnam said that he's only talked to Wilson twice and Bryant said that he and Wilson had a split many years ago.

Putnam and Bryant brought officials from the attorney general's office, the U.S. Secret Service and the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division to the Monday meeting. The legislators have introduced bills to require public notifications of cease-and-desist notices such as the one Wilson received in 1996.

Thomas Griffin, resident agent in charge of the U.S. Secret Service's Greenville office, said it was exceedingly rare for his agency to even confirm the existence of an ongoing investigation. He confirmed an investigation into Atlantic Bullion & Coin.

Griffin was circumspect with investors at the meeting who repeatedly challenged him on why Wilson had not been arrested.

"I'm from Greenville," Griffin said. "I have very little patience or tolerance for this type of crime, if it happened. We're going to be thorough, and leave no stone unturned."

He and other officials said it is difficult to arrest someone in such a complicated case but said investors' interests are being protected by state and federal officials.

Sen. Bryant said at the end of the meeting that he still wasn't sure why Wilson had not been arrested but that he understood it was an ongoing investigation.

Meyers defended the attorney general's office, which had issued a cease-and-desist order to Wilson in 1996. She said she was the only attorney overseeing securities back then and had dealt with the 1996 order. Meyers has previously been identified by the state agency as being integral in bringing the current complaint to light.

Meyers said the 1996 order had little to support it; an anonymous person had reported that Wilson was trading securities rather than simply selling gold or silver. Wilson told her that he was selling physical metals and did not have any investors.

Selling the precious metal would be commodity dealing while Wilson is accused of selling certificates for silver investment, making it a security.

Meyers said attorneys working on the current case, which records indicate began at least late last year, have been heartbroken over the individual investors' stories.

"But don't blame yourself," she told investors. "There are doctors, lawyers, financial planners, people who were successful. Ponzi schemers who can keep it going are

good at what they do. They refine the approach they use and become better and better.”

Meyers said a 92-year-old man began the case and he drove to an interview with her despite caring for his wife with Alzheimer's. Meyers said the man had pulled his money out, or had attempted to do so, and his was the complaint that began the case anew against Wilson.

All of the officials stressed that the case was ongoing, which limited their responses.

Meyers said it was the first, and likely last, time that the attorney general's office would be commenting in such a public manner on the case while it was still in progress.

“Just don't assume that if you don't see anything, that it's not happening,” she said.

Meyers said Wilson's attorney had talked to investigators and appears to be supportive of using a receiver to control the money during the investigation.

Jeffrey Merriam, a Greenville attorney representing Wilson, told the Independent Mail on Monday that he would not comment on the case but he disputed statements made by the attorney general's office last week, which said that Wilson had filed a motion to oppose the state's closure of his bank account.

“We are not opposed to that,” Merriam said. “We have not filed such a motion and have no intention of doing so.”

*Independent Mail reporter Nikie Mayo contributed to this story.*



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